

Holiness: The Big Picture
Psalms 96:1-12

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I was listening a talk show the other day, I am not sure which one, when I heard a woman referring to her family as uneducated. What she meant was that she was the only college graduate in her family.

The rest of her family, which had apparently all completed high school, were deemed uneducated. Isn't that fascinating? High school graduates considered uneducated. What a novel idea.

Education, as many of you may know, isn't always accomplished through a formal process.

In other words, going to classes, taking exams, and passing a controlled practicum where you progress through levels of difficulty and complexity.

This is illustrated in the story of Keith, a construction supervisor. Keith was a good ol' boy in the best sense of the word. School was not an item on his resume.

One day, as his crew was pouring the footing for a large utility building, the vice president of the construction company drove up to check on the progress. Keith told the crew to take a break while he and the boss had conference.

It was interesting to see Keith and this well-dressed, educated man discussing the building. Without a blueprint anywhere to be seen, they began talking details about the building being built.

They detailed problem areas, walked up to the door, and indicated what adjustments needed to be made for it to shut properly.

They even talked about how to change the support structure – extending this beam so many inches, moving this one over just a hair.

They pointed and moved around the building as if it already existed, seeing the unseen – a building that only existed in their minds.

Keith was obviously educated, not in the traditional sense, not through books, classes and exams, but through experience and training on the job.

His education had taught him a skill that no amount higher education can impart to a person. Keith could see the big picture. He could envision the finished product.

There's an enormous value to being able to see the big picture, not the least of which is being able to discern problems before they actually occur.

When we see the big picture, we're better prepared to establish a plan to get us there.

When we see the big picture, we're better prepared to know where we are on the way.

When we see the big picture, it gives us a realistic idea about how far we have to go.

Seeing the big picture can motivate us. It can give us the endurance we need to make it through difficult times.

Last week, we talked about holiness and whether or not it's still important to the Christian life. We found that holiness is indeed necessary. Holiness is not passé.

So, this morning we're going to examine holiness in order to try and get the big picture.

Therefore, to frame our big picture of holiness, let's begin by looking at Psalm 96, a cry of God's people to reveal His holiness.

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Now, it amazes me that very few people recognize the evangelical nature of the Old Testament faith. Psalm 96 is just such an example.

Psalm 96 is one of those wonderful psalms of praise that remind the people of God what they're supposed to be about.

The modern church often acts as if God had no interest in anyone except the children of Israel before Jesus came.

As if, prior to the cross, all nations other than Israel were expendable. It's as if grace was in short supply before Jesus came on the scene.

But Psalm 96 tells us a different story. This psalm issues a call to praise. A summons for all the earth to sing praise to God.

Psalm 96:2-3, "Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples."

So, the question is: Why praise His name? Well, these verses are probably referring to the exodus event and God bringing the children of Israel into the Promised Land.

That's one reason for the Israelites to praise God. But, why would all the rest of the earth want to praise Him or declare His glory? Verses 4-6 answer that question.

Psalm 96:4-6, *“For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.”*

There are two points to ponder in these verses that help us understand what lay at the core of this call to praise.

The first is how the psalm declares all other gods to be idols, i.e. false gods with no power and, more importantly, no life.

Idols are created by men, so they’re incapable of themselves to create anything. The second is that the God, all the earth is called to praise, is the One who created it.

These two points reveal what separates God from everything else. What makes Him unlike the lifeless idols that so many others worship.

It’s at this point in the psalm that the source of praise for God becomes evident. It’s because He’s holy.

In verse 9, the psalm calls on all things created to *“Worship the LORD in the splendor of His holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.”*

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To understand what the *“splendor of his holiness”* is, we must first understand holiness as it relates to God.

Holiness is not an easy term to wrap your head around. It’s a word that doesn’t get much use outside of the Christian church.

Even within the church it has fallen into disuse, except as an adjective for God. If you ask a theologian to define holiness, you’ll get a dissertation instead of an answer.

But the key thought behind “holiness” is much simpler. The root word for holiness actually means “apart or, separate.”

The idea is that God is holy because He’s separate from creation and from its defilement.

Unlike other gods, whose power and existence were tied to a people, a region, or a nation, God stands outside creation. He is master over all of it.

Where the pagans attributed some aspect of nature to the power of their god, such as fertility, God is the Creator of the natural world, distinct from it and ruler over its entirety.

Pagan gods were thought to have human passions and reason, even weaknesses, but on a god-like scale.

Yet, God is holy because He’s totally other than human, utterly different. He’s separate from sin, evil, and all imperfection.

His power and purpose aren’t diminished or thwarted by the failure of His servants. His holiness is not compromised by our ungodliness. God remains apart and perfect.

It’s because of this that the first thing a person is struck with, when he or she is brought into God’s presence, like Isaiah, is His holiness.

When we come into His presence, we see just how separate God is from us. We become overwhelmed by the realization of how little separation there is between us and the rest of creation.

In other words, how much we’re tied to creation and how much separate and distinct God is from us.

Because He is God, He is able to declare something or someone else as holy. That is, to set it or him/her apart for His use.

He's able to declare something holy, not because He infuses it with some magical, purifying power, but because it belongs to Him Who is altogether separate.

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Now, what does all this talk of separateness mean for us? Well, it means that holiness has to do primarily with our relationship to God.

By virtue of our relationship to God, in and through Christ Jesus, we're declared holy.

By virtue of our relationship to God, in and through Christ Jesus, we're separated to God for His pleasure and purpose.

That's our fixed and unvarying state, in Jesus. We're holy because we belong to God.

But we're also called to be holy. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 1:15-16, *"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*

As God has separated us onto Himself, declaring us holy, our task, or job, is to be what God has already made us; holy, separated for His use and pleasure.

This means that holiness is basic to every Christian. As JI Packer puts it, *"It is not an option, but a requirement. God wants his children to live up to his standards and to do Him credit in the eyes of the watching world...."*

Since we're set apart for God from the moment we first believed, and since the relationship that set us apart comes by grace and is totally the work of God, our debt of gratitude is to *"practice moral and spiritual holiness on a day-to-day basis."*

That's our part of the love relationship into which God has drawn us. But holiness is not a human accomplishment.

Holiness comes through cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives to sanctify us in order for us to reflect the love and character of Jesus Christ.

So, what does it take to "practice moral and spiritual holiness on a day-to-day basis?"

In Psalm 42:1-2, we read about a person who longs after God: *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"*

What an exquisite expression of desire. This is written in language we can feel. We not only hear it with our ears, but we also drink it deeply into our hearts.

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Yet, such a desire for God is the first marker of holiness. But such unabashed desire for God doesn't come easily for us since we are born sinful.

Our natural inclinations are to desire only what serves and pleases us.

So, being holy requires us to redirect our desires; to detach our desires from things of the created world, particularly from ourselves and our own self-serving lusts.

It's through Christ that we can redirect our desires to focus "*on fellowship with the Father and the Son*" and continue to strengthen the redirected desire.

Put simply, we must learn to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Another marker of holiness is the cultivating of virtues or as JI Packer puts it, "*Holiness means not only desiring God, but also loving and practicing righteousness, out of a constant exercise of conscience to discern right from wrong and an ardent purpose of doing all that one can to please God.*"

Think of holiness as cultivating the fruit of the Spirit that Paul lists in Galatians 5.

Galatians 5:22-24, "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*"

A third marker of holiness is following the Spirit's urgings. Here's where many have gotten into trouble, primarily out of seeking some sort of supernatural experience. They mistake their own urges for that of the Holy Spirit.

Now, I'm being generous when I say "*they mistake.*" Usually, it's a form of rationalization that the person makes so they can get what they want without having to answer for it, or as many say, "God made me do it."

Can you think of a more ironclad excuse? But the test of any inner promptings is whether or not it agrees with the Word of God.

As John writes in his first letter, “...do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God.”

The fourth marker of holiness is when we begin to gain ground against the onslaught of sin. The battle against sin is never-ending. It seems like when we get one sin under control, another pops up.

Or, we start feeling confident about our victory over some sin and, sensing our pride, the devil finds another foothold.

But the Scriptures clearly teach us that God justifies us in order to sanctify us; in order to conform us to the image of Christ.

Colossians 3:5-10, *“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”*

In the Christian, sin has been dethroned. Just as Christ died to sin, we died to sin. Since we are dead to sin, we should no longer live as if we were still bound by its power.

The final marker of holiness is the practice of Spiritual disciplines. Throughout Scripture we’re encouraged to take an intentional, purposed effort to develop our relationship with God.

Psalms 1 speaks of meditating day and night on the law of the Lord. Psalm 5 speaks of rising in the morning for prayer. Hebrews 10:25 speaks of not forsaking the gathering together.

Holiness doesn't happen by accident. It's a concerted effort to deepen our relationship with God in Christ.

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Conclusion

Motivated by the matchless love Jesus displayed on the cross, we approach our faith life with the same tenacity, self-control, and dedication the marathon runner brings to the course in preparation for a race.

We deliberately set our course to run deep into the Father's arms. When you combine these five markers, you fill in the frame for holiness that we built earlier and get the big picture.

As you go home this afternoon, let me encourage you to take one thought with you. By virtue of our relationship to God in and through Christ Jesus, we're declared holy. Separated to God for his pleasure and purpose.

As God has separated us onto Himself, declaring us holy, our task is to be what God has already made us; holy, separated for His use and pleasure.